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# Dare We Break the Vicious Circle *of fighting evil with evil!*



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the Vicious Circle  
*of fighting evil with evil!*

*by*  
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A SERMON PREACHED AT THE RIVERSIDE CHURCH  
NEW YORK, N. Y., FEBRUARY 19, 1939



# Dare We Break the Vicious Circle

*of fighting evil with evil!*

FOR SOME of us it is easier to believe in the Christian theology than in the Christian ethic. A generation ago many were saying: We cannot believe your Christian ideas of God, but the ethical principles of Jesus are the hope of the world.

Today, however, it is the ethical principles of Jesus that are difficult.

By the Christian ethic I mean no mere ordinary, humane decency, loving those who love us, but rather the radical, sometimes incredible, demands of Jesus that we love our enemies, that if smitten on one cheek we turn the other also, or if compelled to go one mile we go two instead, that we do good to those who hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us. There is the rub today.

The reason for this is the extraordinary vividness with which a powerful temptation assails us all, the temptation to resist evil with evil. When on the Western

prairies a conflagration starts, men fight fire with fire, burning a swath across which the advancing flames cannot leap. What is thus well done in the physical world we are continually tempted to do in the moral world. We fight evil with evil.

### **We Copy Those We Hate**

In war, if one side uses poison gas, the other side may at first be horrified, but in the end we all succumb. It takes poison gas to fight poison gas. If one side uses conscription, which is of the essence of dictatorship, the other side, being a democracy, at first is shocked, but in the end copies the technique of the enemy. It takes conscription to fight conscription.

In personal relationships we are habitually tempted to meet bad temper with bad temper, resentment with resentment, sometimes chicanery with chicanery, and in all this we are morally sustained because we think we are resisting evil—as, indeed, we are, but *with evil*.

At that crucial point Jesus parts company with us. It is there that his revolutionary ethic begins.

Listen to him: "How can Satan cast out Satan?" Hidden away in the third chapter of Mark's Gospel that searching ques-

tion stands, summing up, I think, the essential meaning of Jesus' way of life. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" How can evil be the cure of evil? How can two wrongs make a right?

No question could be more pertinent to our modern world, where today violence rises on every side, ill-will is rampant, aggressive iniquities must be resisted by good men, and the temptation to fight evil with evil is almost irresistible.

Nevertheless, the question of Jesus haunts the Christian conscience and in quiet moments of insight reveals a strange, uncanny common sense—How can Satan cast out Satan?

### **Answering Evil by More Evil**

In the first place, how can the vicious circle of evil answered by more evil, answered by more evil, answered by more evil still, ever be broken unless, somewhere, some one refuses to go on with it?

Watch this vicious cycle of wrong answering wrong. Iniquity rises, demanding that we fight back. So, following the pattern of the natural ethic, against which Jesus took his revolutionary stand, we fight bitterness with bitterness, hatred with hatred, violence with violence, evil

growing in a mounting crescendo as wrong answers wrong.

This process is afoot everywhere, from international relationships, where they bomb our cities and kill our women and children, and so we bomb their cities and kill them, to personal relationships, where we say, He has been unjust—I will show him, I will pay the devil in his own coin.

In this regard how like we human beings are to dogs! For one dog barks and the other barks back and the first barks more loudly and the second becomes more noisy still, in a mounting crescendo of hostility. So one man excused his terrier to the exasperated owner of another. "After all," he said, "the dog is only human."

### **The Tragedy of Name-Calling**

From the time, as children, we fell into angry name-calling, each trying to lay his tongue to some more stinging epithet, we all have faced this elemental problem, and now that, more mature, we are more dignified, our resentment taking a colder form but remaining still resentment quite unredeemed, who does not know that vicious circle of bitterness answered by bitterness, answered by bitterness again? It is the tragedy of the world!

Shakespeare dramatized this in *Romeo and Juliet*, which, far from being a drama



of romantic love alone, is first of all a play about a feud — the house of Capulet against the house of Montague. The first and last words of the play concern the feud, one house against the other, hating each other, meeting violence with violence, evil growing by what it feeds upon and two wrongs never coming out right. Remember Mercutio, slain in the duel and in the insight of his dying moment crying, "A plague o' both your houses!"

### **"Give Me Thy Hand"**

In the theater one sees people go out before the final scene as though, the love poetry being over, they thought the play was done. Shakespeare would have disliked that. It is the final scene, the climax of the play that he was driving at, where Capulet and Montague stand ashamed and penitent, their long and bitter feud stopped in midcourse by a love that broke the vicious circle of its hate. In that final moment of the play, when a Christian might kneel as before the mystery of the cross, Capulet says, "O brother Montague, give me thy hand."

So Shakespeare after his own fashion dramatized what the Christian ethic would say, that the world's feud can never end and the vicious circle of wrong answering

wrong come to a close until, somewhere, somebody refuses to go on with it. Jesus meant this by his homely saying that if a man is smitten on one cheek he should not smite back, starting thus an endless chain of retaliation.

Let him try a new technique! Better, he would say, that one adventure on a revolutionary ethic and, if two blows must be given, take both rather than give one. Let him see if he cannot thus break the endless sequence of fighting evil with evil, whereby we always become the evil that we fight.

This, of course, is what the pacifists at their best are driving at with reference to war. The most shameful aspect of our present international situation, I think, is the way we ape the enemies we hate.

### **Are We "Yes-Men" to Dictatorships?**

The dictatorships say, War! so we say, War! They build vast armaments, so we build vast armaments. Step by step, day by day, we become their yes-men. They say, Dictatorial control of the nation for the sake of war's efficiency! So in Washington we propose bills that provide on the day of war's declaration that the nation shall conscript life, property, labor, conscience.

The dictatorships say, Let the War Department determine the foreign policy! So we, too, against the tradition of our people and the very words of our Constitution, say the same thing, and in Washington—witness the proposition for the fortification of Guam—not so much the civilian representatives of the people as the army and the navy begin to initiate, and so ultimately to predetermine, our foreign policy.

**We Fight Evil with Evil and  
Become the Evil That We Fight**

What apes we are! We copy those we hate. We fight evil with evil and become the evil that we fight. We will conquer them, we say, and so first of all we let them make us in their image.

All this we do, thinking Jesus to be a visionary idealist. He is not. His ethic shows a more realistic insight into what is going on in this modern world than does our boasted hard-headedness.

Despite their governments, the people of all the nations in their hearts and homes want peace. Somewhere, sometime, millions of men and women must stand up and cry, We're through; we will not go on forever with war causing more war, causing more war, causing more war still.

If some one says, But we may be compelled to go to war! I ask only that the meaning of that be realistically faced. For in the war you say America is compelled to enter, every cruelty that human beings, implemented with unprecedented instruments, can inflict on human beings will be inflicted. In that terrific wrestling bout no holds will be barred. The word "sacred" will be dropped from the human vocabulary, and neither child nor woman, home, church, school, honor, nor plighted faith will be respected.

### **No One Can Really Win a War**

If we are the apes of our enemies in peace time, in war time we will be apes indeed. Every cruelty they devise we will match. Every devastation they inflict on human beings we will equal. In the end no barbarity will be beneath us.

The boys we bore in travail and reared in love in our homes, schools, and churches will become the yes-men of the enemies we fight, in every dastardly deed they do. They will be compelled to.

And when it is over, in a world where all agree that no one can really win a war, with civilization, it may be, wrecked, with a thousand new problems raised for every one solved and countless hatreds engendered for every one satisfied, I can think

of only one factor that still will stand quite unimpaired: namely, the strange man of Galilee whom many call a visionary idealist still asking with infinite sorrow, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

Let us take a further step and note that whether or not this principle of Jesus that evil is not to be fought with evil appeals to us, depends primarily on what it is that most of all we want. Do we really want to cast out Satan? Do we most of all desire to get rid of the evil of the world? Multitudes of people want something else altogether—their own prestige, personal or national, their gain and profit, their vengeance even, or their private conquest. Of course, to such Jesus' ethic is preposterous.

### **The Supreme Aim of Jesus**

We cannot see his meaning truly any more than we can see the windows of a Gothic cathedral until we go inside, and from within his life understand what most of all he wanted. Above all else he wanted to rid the world of its evil. Whatever it cost, whether it brought him to the cross or no, somehow to rid the world of its evil was his passionate desire. If *that* is what a man wants, then evil is not an instrument to use.

It is only in the light of this supreme aim and motive of Jesus that one can see

his ethical principles as reasonable. If one wants most of all to cast out Satan, then an alliance with Satan is no means to that end.

### **The Folly of Vindictiveness**

Translate this into personal life and its truth is clear. A man does a wrong to us; what do we want? It may be that our first impetuous desire turns to vindictiveness—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

So one man I know of had an enemy. For years financially he laid for him until he got him, sold him out, lock, stock and barrel, house and furniture, and, with a satisfaction which only the vindictive know, cried, "My God! but that's conquering!" If a man wants *that*, then Jesus' ethic is preposterous.

When, however, a man did Jesus a wrong, Jesus felt concern for the man. There are different ways in which one can intimate the presence of need and none more unmistakable than to be unfair, unjust, ungenerous. When a man does a wrong it is as though he flew unwittingly a flag of distress and uttered a cry for help.

Evil-doing may be variously interpreted. It may cry to us, **Revenge!** It may say, **Ignore me!** It may say, **SOS;** there is a need to be met, a deep want in

this man's life, an evil that by good-will, perchance, you may help to cure.

So, when the Samaritan villagers used Jesus despitefully, he was sorry for the villagers. When Judas betrayed him, he was heartbroken because he could not help Judas. It was the wrong-heartedness itself he wanted to get rid of, the unkindness and bitterness he wished to banish from the earth. When one takes the measure of this supreme motive, Jesus' ethic becomes not preposterous but inevitable. Satan cannot cast out Satan.

### **Risk and Sacrifice Are Necessary**

If someone says that this ethic is risky, that it is bound to cost sacrifice and when used on some people is sure to fail, I answer, Of course it is. During the last blizzard, we are told, a woman living on a branch of the Ohio saw a poor dog drifting on the ice-floes and, touched with pity, ran to the stream, with difficulty launched her boat, fought for two hours before she reached the dog and brought him safely back. Then he bit her and she died of rabies.

There are human curs like that. Of all men in history, do you think Jesus did not know it? But he would say, I think, Take it any way you will, human life is risky;

you cannot avoid risk in life, and the salvation of the world depends on men and women who will take *this* risk, to face ill-will with good-will, to try to break the vicious circle of evil's sequence, where wrong answers wrong, and when two blows must be given to take both rather than give one.

### **A Ministry of Good-Will**

If we say, In certain personal relationships this ethic can be made to work and it was only of these individual relationships that Jesus was thinking, I suspect that shows how little we know about Jesus' world. He was not tucked off in a forgotten corner of the earth. He lived on one of the major highways of the Roman Empire. Every breath of news, I suspect, from the Thames to the Euphrates soon or late came to Nazareth.

He lived in a violent generation when force ruled the world and might made right as terribly as it does today. He lived in a nation seething with violent revolt. He dealt not only with Saducees, compromising with Rome; not only with Pharisees, waiting for their supernatural Messiah to come from heaven and redeem them; but with Zealots, fiery, militant, revolutionary rebels, crying out for bloodshed to make right their heinous wrongs.



This public situation, so dreadfully like ours, Jesus had in mind when he turned his back on revenge and bloodshed and based his ministry on undiscourageable good-will.

It was this public situation he faced in the temptation at the beginning of his ministry, when the devil, as it were, showed him all the kingdoms of the earth and said, "All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

How perennial a temptation that is! How terribly it assails us all today! To join forces with the devil to beat the devil, to fight evil with evil—ah, Christ, how did you resist the pressure of it in your time and how in a world like this do you expect us to follow you?

### **Satan Cannot Cast Out Satan**

Yet when in calmer moments one faces the facts, one wonders if he is not right. Satan cannot cast out Satan. All history is a running commentary on that. The means determine the end. Everlastingly that is true—the means determine the end. We of all generations should understand that.

Did we not fight a war to make the world safe for democracy? We were resisting evil. We prided ourselves on that.

We were morally indignant against a real wrong and sacrificially devoted to a holy cause. We would make the world safe for democracy. Conscription to make the world safe for democracy! Poison gas, bombing of open cities, blockades that starved millions, to make the world safe for democracy! Dictatorial control of the whole nation's life—even of what we ate and wore—the very suspension of the Bill of Rights, to make the world safe for democracy! And in the end a treaty, the only kind of treaty modern war can issue in—vengeful, selfish, cruel—to make the world safe for democracy!

### **The Sanest Realist of Us All**

So we woke up to find the world less safe for democracy than it had been in generations. We discovered that war, being essentially totalitarian and dictatorial, cannot defend democracy, but that the means determine the end. Ah, Christ, you are not a visionary idealist; you are the sanest realist of us all. Satan cannot cast out Satan.

Let us take a further step and note the positive power of this ethic when it is put to work. For it is not weak, as the average man thinks, but very strong. Of all ridiculous beatitudes, some would say, the

most incredible is the one where Jesus sums this ethic up and the faith on which it is built: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." What nonsense! says the average man.

Yet would you stake your credit upon the opposite? Blessed are the Hitlers for they shall inherit the earth! Would you? Grant him every temporary victory you think possible. Would you say that in the long run he will inherit the earth? I know no intelligent person who thinks that. All history rises up against that.

### **Empires Built on Force Fade Away**

Like children's sand houses built upon the shore, age after age the tides of destiny have risen and wiped out the empires built on force. Of all contrasts in history none could be more disproportionate than that between the Roman Empire on one side and Calvary's cross upon the other. Yet the Roman Empire has fallen and many another empire since, like children's blocks toppling in a row, but still that cross stands and haunts the conscience of the world.

So I think Jesus sat many a day upon the hills above Nazareth and looked across the plain of Esdraelon, stretching mile after mile before his gaze. There the his-

toric battles of the world had been fought. There the empires of the Euphrates and the Nile had clashed. Age after age violence had met violence and kings and pharaohs had fallen in futility, and Satan had never cast out Satan yet.

It was from that vision, not first of an ideal but of the facts, that Jesus went out, I think, determined, though he died for it, to introduce into the world a new and revolutionary ethic—meet ill-will with goodwill, dare to break the vicious circle of evil answering evil, never fight wrong with wrong. Satan cannot cast out Satan.

### **The Proper Use of Force**

This does not mean that all use of force is satanic. Coercion has its proper place in life, always indicating a pathological condition but capable of salutary use in the interests of the whole community, as, for example, against the insane or the criminal. Even in such realms, however, the Christian ethic has been so far influential that not retaliation but cure and reformation have become the test and aim of intelligent procedure.

Because one believes in municipal police one is not by any logic driven, as some seem to suppose, to believe in war. War is a highly specialized form of force, in its

preparations, procedures, and results distinguishable from any other of force's exhibitions. One may believe in the police and think dueling wrong; one may grant the salutary nature of coercion communally applied for the good of all and still think gladiatorial shows are unmitigated and outmoded evil.

### **War Is Satanic, and Only Satan Gains**

So one may pray and work for an ultimate international community, in which the collective security of all is the aim of all, and the policing of the world is the joint affair of all, and may still see clearly that at the present moment no war will mean that or anything aimed in that direction, but will be the old satanic, retaliatory process, motivated by imperialistic ambitions and waged with sadistic savagery to an end catastrophically evil. War is satanic, and only Satan has anything to gain from it.

However some may doubt the possibility of applying this principle to public affairs, how can one doubt its magisterial power in personal relationships? I would almost venture to say that any special fineness of spirit that anybody here possesses is his because sometime he has lived at the receiving end of this ethical principle.

For there are three kinds of goodness in

the world. First, coerced goodness, where some one is good to us because we can require it. That is not impressive. Then there is deserved goodness, where we have been good to some one and now, *quid pro quo*, so much for so much, he is good to us. That is not deeply impressive. Then there is undeserved goodness, where we have been unworthy, ungenerous, unkind, unjust, and, lo! some one comes back at us with good-will and friendliness.

From the days at home when our parents so treated us, through all our lives, no force has reached so deep, laid hold so hard, lifted so powerfully as that. Thank God not everybody has slapped back at us! Thank God some people did go the second mile with us! The salvation of the world depends on the multiplication of people who understand and practice that adventurous ethic.

### **What Shall America Do?**

Do not represent me as having said that it is simple to apply this principle to the world's large affairs. It is desperately difficult. No one of us is wise enough to see around the next corner. Only as Americans this seems clear, that we are at the fork of the road and that either we are going to throw the vast influence of this

nation on the side of those constructive forces that make for international goodwill and conference instead of violence or else we are in for an era dominated by our aping of our enemies.

They make war! We make war! They build vast armaments! We build vast armaments! They use poison gas! We use poison gas! They say, All restrictions off on the most brutal instincts of mankind! We say the same, until once more, fighting evil with evil until we are the evil that we fight, far from conquering our enemies we let them make us after their own image.

So at long last, at the end of a ruinous era, we shall be facing again the question—which God grant us grace to face now before it is too late—“How can Satan cast out Satan?”

